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SLOW FAITH

VOLUME 28 NUMBER 7 SEPTEMBER 2015

All time is holy and human beings are meant to live in sacred sync with God's rhythms.

- 6 Labor Day: Now and then**
 - 12 Sabbath play**
 - 18 Slow down: Sabbath ahead**
 - 22 Finding room**
 - 34 Waiting**
 - 36 Life is not a tightrope**
- Our baptismal calling relates to our daily bread. *Sue A. Larson*
- The holiness of our Sabbath observance comes in finding joy in stillness and in activity. *Julia Seymour*
- Holy helps provide a way to remember and mark our day of rest. *Nancy Stelling*
- We find renewal in relying on God. *Brenda Kimaro*
- I learned to enjoy the scenery on a detour. *Linda Johnson Seyenkulo*
- The edges around sabbath-keeping are not so rigid. *Emily Carson*

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 Voices**
 - 5 Give us this day**
 - 10 Let us pray**
 - 16 Family matters**
 - 26 Bible study**
Slow faith
 - 32 Leader guide**
 - 33 Sabbath-keeping self-assessment**
 - 41 Grace notes**
 - 42 Amen!**
- We all need sabbath** *Elizabeth Hunter*
- Traveling light** *Vanessa Young*
- Mindfulness as prayer** *Julie K. Ageson*
- Back to school** *Elyse Nelson Winger*
- Session 1 Sabbath-keeping**
- By looking to Scripture and our faith traditions, we rediscover the rhythms of God.
Liv Larson Andrews
- As you work through the Bible, slow down with time, breath and relationships.
Liv Larson Andrews
- Take this quiz to begin reflecting on the life you're leading. *Linda Post Bushkofsky*
- Living a sabbath life** *Linda Post Bushkofsky*
- Sabbath challenge** *Catherine Malotky*

PLUS ...

- 43 Directory of reader services**
- Subscription, editorial and advertising information

gathermagazine.org



VOICES

We all need sabbath

by Elizabeth Hunter

This year I didn't sign

my kids up for baseball, music lessons, karate, art classes, basketball and the merry-go-round of activities of past years. It was too much. They knew it. I knew it.

We decided to focus on what they love: soccer, scouts, learning to swim, playing with friends, being with family. We needed a break. It made sense. But secretly I felt terrible about it. Sabbath? This issue's writers are right: sabbath can be scary.

I don't remember there being this kind of pressure (what Emily Carson calls a tightrope) when I was a child. In the neighborhood where my family now lives, two public high schools serve about 10 towns. One, a magnet school, can only accept a small percentage of the highest-achieving, most extra-curricular-playing students; the other is huge and open to all, but has abysmal college acceptance rates, some gang activity and bullying.

With homes still underwater after the 2008 economic downturn, many, including my family, can't afford to move to another community for a better public high school. Most parents I talk with hope to offset private school tuition or loans with academic, sports or music scholarships. By not signing them up for everything, was I dooming my children to mediocrity?

And where does it end? In the push to get into good colleges, teens in our community report that homework and study can leave only six hours or so for sleep each night. They can't wait to get

to college, they say. So they can sleep.

It's not just youth who are unresisted and overwhelmed; it's adults, too. According to a 2014 U.S. Travel Association study, "All Work and No Pay" 40 percent of adults who are privileged to have vacation days (unlike the many workers Susan Larson reminds us of in "Labor Day") do not use all of their vacation days. American workers are taking less time off now than at any point in the last 40 years.

Reasons given include fears of work piling up or of appearing replaceable. Yet the study found that forfeiting vacation time leaves workers more stressed and 6.5 percent less likely to receive a raise or bonus than peers who use vacations.

What's the alternative?

Knowing that we are beloved of God, Emily Carson tells us. Accepting loved one's gift of sabbath time for rest and renewal, as Brenda Kimaro learns. Through stillness and play, reminding ourselves that "there is a God and we are not that God. Our schedules are not that God. The activities of our children are not that God. The demands of daily life are not holy or even omnipresent," as Julia Seymour says.

After all, "if our creative God weaves rest into the fabric of God's life, who are we not to?" Nancy Stelling writes. "... in our care of the earth we are 'co-creators' with God, shouldn't we also be 'co-resters' with God?" Slowing down and honoring sabbath as Julie Aageson writes, really can be an act of prayer. ✎

Elizabeth Hunter is managing editor of *Gather*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Traveling light

by Vanessa Young

The thought of packing everything I'd need to live and work for a year into two 75-pound suitcases terrified me. I was preparing to depart for a year of service with the ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program. I'm a planner; I like to know the who/what/when/where/why of all situations. Family and friends know me as "the prepared one." So when packing for a year of international service, I stuck with what I knew: plan for every possibility and use the maximum weight allowance to cover all the bases.

To make a long story short, dragging nearly 150 pounds of luggage through Heathrow Airport, through miles of terminals and train connections, was one of the most miserable experiences I've ever had as a traveler. Discovering how many things I could live without became an important part of this formative year in my Christian faith. It was humbling and empowering to learn that I didn't need most things I'd packed in order to live 4,000 miles away from home. Out of all that I'd brought, the most important things were a few pictures of my family to have nearby, a couple pairs of reliable blue jeans, my hiking boots and music for comfort when I was homesick.

Why had I brought so much stuff with me? Was it a personal thing, an American thing or a human thing? A keeper of the commandments once asked Jesus what he lacked in his faith, and was told: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have

treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). In relying on my own efforts to plan ahead and prepare for everything, perhaps I'd forgotten to fully trust in God's provision. I'd lost sight of the who and the why.

Each passing month of service taught me new lessons about God's faithful provision. Living simply – without so many clothes, a car and electronic gadgets – helped me focus on the meaning of accompaniment and being fully present in the community where I served. Scaling down my possessions allowed me to follow Jesus more closely that year. It continues to influence my intentional efforts to live simply to this day.

It's been 11 years since I dragged 150 pounds of stuff across the Atlantic to begin my YAGM year. I still have the callus formed on my hand from that long trek through Heathrow. I'm grateful for this physical reminder of the good work God's been doing in me over time.

As I write this, I've been making plans to participate in an Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land pilgrimage to the Holy Land. No one would be surprised to learn that I've been thinking about what to pack. Although this time when I cross the ocean, my bag of choice will be my hiking pack; I'll keep it simple and travel light so I can follow the way of Jesus. 🌸

Vanessa Young is the director of youth and family ministry at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Wheaton, Illinois. She served as a YAGM from 2004 to 2005 and Global Mission Volunteer from 2005 to 2006 in the United Kingdom.

LABOR DAY

NOW AND THEN

by Sue A. Larson



SEPTEMBER MARKS A DECLINE IN THE NUMBER OF LONG, WARM DAYS OF SUMMER.

It begins the slow slide into cool nights and the turning leaves that mark the season of fall. If you love football, this is your time. The games have started, the schedules are posted and fans are eager for action. But summer doesn't really end until Labor Day weekend, when we give thanks for and reflect on our various occupations and honor the labor of all who work.

Mark 7's gospel for worship the weekend before Labor Day shows a cultural conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Jesus' time, who kept a close eye on him. They had the luxury of maintaining the most exacting of religious guidelines and wanted to know why Jesus and his followers refused to comply with these laws. Some very clear reasons were that the disciples and other working-class people did not have slaves or servants to bring them water for washing at the required times as the elite did. And, as a practical matter, they were often too far from a water source to find any. Then, as now, water in Palestine was a precious commodity. So the leaders' insistence on compliance sounded privileged and out of touch. The culture in which they flourished did not function for people who had no resources to keep such rules.

Biblical theologian John Dominic Crossan describes the plight of Palestinian workers in the first century. In his scholarly work *The Historical Jesus*, he wrote that under Roman occupation, the people who followed Jesus "lived as close to bare subsistence as those who controlled them could calculate." Drought, natural disasters, high taxation

and heavy debt drove many to destitution. They could not keep the cleanliness laws nor pay the temple taxes required of them to be right in the eyes of the law. Jesus' failure to adhere to these laws recognized the realities of their everyday lives.

What about labor in our time?

For many workers, Labor Day involves the issue of unions and organizing. My family did not have that kind of a background, and my dad was pretty biased. He believed that, like the Teamsters, most unions were corrupt. I didn't question that perspective because my work history when I was in my teens and twenties was pretty benign. I didn't feel misused; and if I had, there were family members or co-workers who would speak up for me. Even if not entirely fair or just, my habits and understandings felt normal and right to me.

My views began to expand as I ventured farther from home and experienced more of the working world. On the radio I heard people such as Studs Terkel, the crusty Chicago broadcaster and Pulitzer Prize-winning author who told the stories of working Americans better than anyone else. He shared with great relish stories of going into the financial district of the city close to Labor Day and standing on the street corner with others waiting for the light to turn. He would position himself next to well-dressed couples hurrying to work in their tailored suits and begin to expound on the benefits of the labor movement, which brought an end to child labor and the gift of the eight-hour day. He laughed

as he told about most of these well-dressed ones moving away from him as fast as they could. But he suspected that they really didn't know a great deal about the labor movement and what it had achieved in American history.

I didn't know that much about the history of the labor movement either; it wasn't a required subject in school. But that changed a little when I agreed to be part of forming an interfaith religion/labor coalition more than 15 years ago that focused on the concerns of people, primarily Latinos, who experienced unfair working conditions in their workplaces in southern Wisconsin. A research organization that tracked income and the cost of living joined with the faith community and other advocates to publish a report in 2001 called "Can't Afford to Lose a Bad Job."

The report's findings revealed a very challenging set of concerns. Workers had to juggle several low-wage jobs, unstable and inflexible work schedules, dangerous working conditions, fear of reprisals for any complaints, racial profiling, unequal treatment, harassment, high rents and crowded homes, lack of safe or affordable child care or health care, little sleep and enormous stress. But, for those who wondered why these workers put up with such conditions, there was an even worse, often far more dangerous life in the nations from which many of those interviewed had come. And, as meager as their wages were, these workers saved and sent money home to support their families still

living in those nations.

The stories were often heart-rending. One woman worked from 10:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. cleaning classrooms and offices, then worked at a food establishment for eight hours, followed by janitorial work at a temp agency for four hours. She was sleeping three hours a night. Another worked as one of two laundresses in a 200-room hotel. Washing and folding the laundry was more than the two of them could do; but they were told that if they didn't like it, they should go somewhere else. One group of housekeepers did complain to hotel management; but when it came time to explain their situation with the boss, only three were willing to do so, and they were immediately fired.

Our baptismal calling

As Christians, we are encouraged to remember that wherever we work, we have opportunities to live out our baptismal calling in lives of witness and service. That came about

for the board of the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice of South Central Wisconsin (part of the Interfaith Worker Justice, www.iwj.org, network) in 2003 when it formed a Worker's Rights Center. In its first nine years, the center helped thousands of workers save their jobs, assisted in recovering over a quarter of a million dollars in unpaid wages, and assisted workers who needed them with referrals to government and social service agencies. It developed a manual to provide training on basic rights to thousands of workers and offered training to



employers on the rights of their employees.

At the core of theology for Martin Luther was the call to faith in a God whose love is unimaginably great, broad and deep. God's love embraces all aspects of our physical and emotional lives. As Luther explained in the Fourth Petition of the Lord's Prayer in his Large Catechism ("Give us this day our daily bread"), God intends for all people to have "everything required to satisfy our bodily needs, such as food and clothing, house and home, fields and flocks, money and property." Luther saw the process of obtaining what we need through our labor as a holy act when performed with faith and gratitude, where, as he wrote, "picking up a piece of straw" could be equal in God's eyes to formal study and prayer.

Luther also believed, as Jesus told the Pharisees in Mark 7, that our faith in God would result in righteous action. As a professor of the Bible steeped in the teachings of the Old Testament, he was passionate about God's directions to the Israelites to live justly and righteously. He did not mince words summarizing the Seventh Commandment.

"To steal is nothing else than to get possession of another's property wrongfully, which briefly comprehends all kinds of advantage in all sorts of trade to the disadvantage of our neighbor. To steal is ... not only to empty our neighbor's coffer and pockets, but to be grasping in the market ... wherever there is trading or taking and giving of money for merchandise or labor. No more shall all the rest prosper who change the open free market into a

carrion-pit of extortion and a den of robbery, where the poor are daily overcharged, and new burdens and high prices are imposed."

Justice as a sign of grace

Luther would have supported those with legitimate authority acting in the public realm to protect workers' rights. As our worship liturgies proclaim, it is the ministry of all the baptized to proclaim Christ in word and in deed. God honors us by including us in working for justice and peace, for the unemployed, underemployed or people taken advantage of in their work as a sign of God's saving grace.

Loving and caring relationships with family and friends can expand to include living lives as informed citizens who are aware of how our food is produced and harvested, of the lives of garment workers who produce our clothing and the work environments of those who work in res-



taurants, motels or other service industries. In doing so, we play a role in ensuring that all who lay their hands to any useful task may receive the just rewards for their work. With joy, we thank God for the rich variety of vocations to which, as a priesthood of believers, we are called. We rejoice in the knowledge that all labor is valued in the eyes of God. 🌸

The Rev. Sue A. Larson is an ELCA pastor and a former ELCA public policy director. She lives in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, with her husband, Terry, who is also an ELCA pastor.



LET US PRAY

Mindfulness as prayer

by Julie K. Ageson

My friends Hileama

and Sarra were Muslim. We lived together in university flats where our rituals and habits were part of the daily routine. We'd often share a cup of tea late in the day, watching our little ones play, delighting in learning from one another. But in the waning light of winter afternoons, Hileama and Sarra would gather their children and hurry back to their tiny flats where prayer mats waited for mindful attention.

Mindfulness as prayer? Multi-tasking is the name of the game I know best. I seem to measure the days by how many tasks I've accomplished, what projects have been tended to, what new things I might find interesting and fulfilling. It isn't that I *have* to be busy; it's that I *love* to be busy. It's a measure of my identity, my productivity, my worth.

Really? In childhood, we'd spend hours dallying in rowboats along the beach looking for bottom fish or scurrying crabs. At night under the dark sky, we'd watch for the movement of satellites and falling stars, always in awe of God's creation. What happened along the way to adulthood? Where do we get the notion that to be productive, there must be nonstop activity? Or that our worth depends on a schedule or a list or a set of accomplishments?

Our tradition doesn't require us to stop the clock for mindful prayer. Our culture encourages us to focus on our own self-interests. To screen out the noise of our lives, to quiet ourselves long enough to pay attention, seems out of

reach. Has adulthood robbed us of the ability to live mindfully?

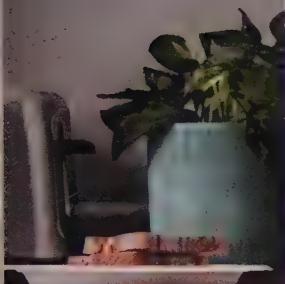
In *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, author Barbara Brown Taylor describes her amazement at the idea of differentiating between trees by the sounds of their shadows. This ability to listen so mindfully is the gift of one who, having completely lost the sight of his eyes as a young person, also describes seeing: "I could not see the light of the world anymore. Yet the light was still there . . . I had only to receive it."

It's disconcerting to think that we who have "eyes to see and ears to hear" may not see or hear very well at all. We do not know how to be still, how to see beneath the surface of things, how to hear the sounds of tree shadows.

Practicing mindfulness is a lifelong challenge. Slowing down long enough to notice an early morning moon is an act of mindfulness. Taking time to listen to one another, to notice and sense another's worry or joy, to be present simply with silence is a sacred act of prayer.

God rests on our eyelids, says Jewish Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, but we are too busy to notice. May we take time to be mindful, to see beneath the surface behind our eyelids, where God rests and waits for us to notice. 🌸

Julie K. Ageson retired from ELCA Resource Center leadership and now she and her spouse write and travel. She is co-author of *One Hope: Re-membling the Body of Christ* (Liturgical Press/Augsburg Fortress) which honors the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.



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Sabbath

and play

by Julia Seymour



Gripping my cellphone in my hand, I squinted at the screen to see the time. Nine o'clock!
It was time to call. When the person on the other end of the line answered, I introduced myself
and said my son would not be in school that day. "Is he sick?" she asked.

"No." I replied. "Resting on Easter Monday is part of our religion. He'll be in tomorrow."

"Okay," she responded slowly. "That might not be an excused absence."

I knew this before I called and I was ready, "We know, but we have to do what's right for us.
He'll be in tomorrow."

With that, I pressed the button and ended the call.
Throwing myself back on the pillows, I sighed with
a huge sense of relief. After a harried week of Easter
preparation and celebration, I slid deeper into my cov-
ers. Sabbath rest felt like a thick comforter, holding
warmth close to me. It sounded like the click of Legos
from downstairs, where the now truant kindergartner
had already been building for an hour. It smelled like
the inside curve of my toddler's neck — sweet and
fresh — as she curled next to me and poked at my face,
Nose. Eyes. Ears. Cheek."

We were taking a sabbath day, a little 24-hour break
from our regular duties, to recharge, relate and rejoice. It
was a privileged decision. As a pastor, it was easy enough
to stay home the day after Easter since nothing pressing
had been scheduled for that day. If I depended on hourly
wages, needed every dime of income or had a recalci-
trant boss, taking a whole day off would seem like a
cruel joke. However, sabbath is not just for the privileged
— it is a privilege, a privilege to observe and to keep. The
prayers of our bodies in stillness, in the creative and in
play, reconnect us with the Holy all around us.

Let my prayers rise up

Imagine a playground. Think of it teeming with children
— swings flying, wheels turning, laughter ringing, the
smells of warm wood, plastic and metal, the pounding
of feet.

Picture that same playground with fewer children.
They play together nicely. Some of the equipment waits
to be used. The laughter is still present, not quite as
loud or boisterous.

Now the playground is empty. The swings sway
gently in the breeze. The slide seems to sag a little,
missing its reasons to stand proudly. Toys lay forgotten
in the sand. One lone sock decorates a picnic table. The
air of possibility is heavy in the perimeter.

The playground becomes overgrown. Weeds choke
the basketball court. The chains rust and break. Steps
crumble and pavement buckles. People avert their eyes
when they pass by; the reality of what was and could
have been, so at odds with what is.

Sometimes I think this is how our faith practice
appears to God. When we are young, we revel in
silliness and imagination about Scripture, God's pres-

ence and nothing being impossible. Slowly as we grow older, we somehow absorb the idea that adult trust in God is made evident through seriousness. We become ashamed or embarrassed to ask questions. We talk about how tired we are because of everything we are doing. We hesitate to rest because we don't want to seem lazy, inefficient or self-important.

The book of Psalms compares prayers offered to God to incense, with the hope that the petitions rising up in words will smell sweet to the One who hears them. (Psalm 141) In 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul explains that those who live in imitation of Christ smell sweetly to God. (2 Corinthians 2:15). God wants to smell our bodies in use – in prayer, in rest, in play. The full experience of those activities is the full privilege of the sabbath reality.

Our God at play

Playtime is often relegated to the world of children, as though God's own self has not played throughout history. The very act of creating all that lives occurred through the Holy One playing in the dirt – making shapes and watching them take on life (Genesis 2:4–25). God's work is not factory formed, with all things being exactly the same. Each piece – animal, plant, person – has idiosyncrasies that are known and are purposeful to the One who made them. God's sense of play is evident in how we are made to work in cooperation and concert with one another and all creation.

In answering Job's appeals, God instructs the grieving man to gird his loins as though preparing for a fight. Rather than approach Job in an attack, God lists the animals of creation: how they are well known to their Creator, how God interacts with them and how God delights in their movements (Job 40–41). There is nothing that has happened to Job that is outside of God's sight. God rejoices in Job's joy. God mourns Job's sadness. God abides in Job's trust. Job must find the way to rest in God, regardless of what happens

around him, in the same way the other members of creation have learned to do.

We miss much of Jesus as a little boy, but we can be certain that he played. As God enfleshed, Jesus allowed us the consolation that God knows what it is to be human. Jesus would have wrestled with his cousins. He likely played hide and seek with neighbors. He probably played with wood scraps under Joseph's workbench and threw rocks into watering holes with friends.

Jesus held that sense of play closely in his ministry. He certainly could have waited for the disciples to return to shore, but instead he walked out to them across the water. (Matthew 14; Mark 6; John 6) Rather than seeing this as a test of the disciples' faith, we can see that Jesus wanted to celebrate the extent of God's presence in him. He had been a part of play in creation since the beginning of time. There was no need to set it aside, but rather time to revel in it by splashing across the tops of the waves.

Be still and play

The purpose of observing the Sabbath or any time of holy rest is to remind ourselves that there is a God and we are not that God. Our schedules are not that God. The activities of our children are not that God. The demands of daily life are not holy or even omnipresent.

The holiness of Sabbath observance comes in finding joy in stillness and in activity. Most children would find a day of "doing nothing" a hideous prospect. It would seem like a punishment. However, a day of leisure – of some rest, some planned activities and some unstructured time – seems glorious. At the end of such a day, my 5-year-old inevitably declares, "This was the BEST DAY EVER." This is his proclamation that the goals of the day – closeness with those he loves (and who love him), fun, activity and joy – were achieved.

It is harder for grown-ups to plan that kind of day, especially for ourselves, because time spent lying in the grass watching clouds is time that is not paying bills or

buying groceries. Drawing a prayer map and slowly coloring it or simply sitting near the brush pile and contemplating the flames as it burns can feel slothful and, thus, sinful. We all know some version of “to everything there is a season,” but we rarely claim the seasons of laughter, dancing and embracing (Ecclesiastes 3).

Jesus explains to his disciples that the Sabbath was made for them, not that they were made for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). He wants them to understand that God set apart holy time for the sake of creation, so that we might rejoice in life and love. If we were made for the Sabbath, then keeping holy time becomes another thing that we must do. The rules around that time become gods in themselves and we forget who is truly holding all things.

Playing and praying go hand in hand for marking sacred time and space. We are actors in God’s story, prompted in our lines by the Holy Spirit. Our God, who finds peace in creation’s joy, has written the play of life in Christ for the healing of the world. We who have become stiff and formal in our roles must learn to look to our younger brothers and sisters. See how they find strength in fun, in questions and in action. See how they shake off mistakes and try again. See how they are not afraid to learn and try new things, for those new things expand their imagination to God’s possibilities and impossibilities.

Where’s my playbook?

Not all individuals and families have the same circum-

stances. Maybe a holy time meal once a week is a goal for your family. Use special plates – even for a fast-food meal. Light candles, put something different in the center of the table or pretend to have a picnic on the floor. Set the alarm a little earlier for a little snuggle time in the morning. Take time to skip or dance, if only by yourself with the curtains drawn. Belt out your favorite vacation Bible school song in the shower.

We are all tired. We are all busy. We are all commanded and invited into sabbath rest. Our habits show our children and our neighbors the fruits of our faith. If we are constantly working, we are not communicating our trust and love in God, who is enough.

Is this easy? Not at all. I had plenty of things still to do on Easter Monday – easily a day’s worth of house work, office work or the possibility of having a day to myself by taking my children to their daily spaces. Instead we lolled in bed. We went to an indoor play space and jumped on giant inflatables, laughing and singing. My daughter and I took a nap while my son played with construction toys. We painted and colored. Holy work, holy rest and holy play were accomplished.

“Will we always take Easter Monday off?” asked my son. “Probably,” I responded. “Playing and resting are part of how we celebrate Jesus being alive.”

It was the best day ever. Until our next sabbath. 🌸
The Rev. Julia Seymour serves Lutheran Church of Hope in Anchorage, Alaska. She enjoys the Alaskan life with her husband, their two children and her dog. Julia loves approaching everything with child-like wonder, including worship and community service.

Recommended resources

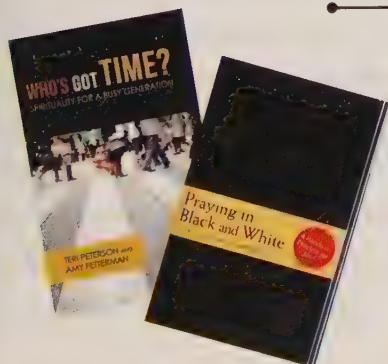
Seamless Faith: Simple Practices for Daily Family Life (Traci Smith, Chalice Press, 2014)

Sacred Pause: A Creative Retreat for the Word-weary Christian (Rachel G. Hackenberg, Paraclete Press, 2014)

Praying in Color (Sybil MacBeth, Paraclete Press, 2013)

Praying in Black and White (Sybil and Andy MacBeth, Paraclete Press, 2011)

Who’s Got Time? Spirituality for a Busy Generation (Amy Fetterman and Teri Peterson, Chalice Press, 2013)





FAMILY MATTERS

Back to school

by Elyse Nelson Winger

This time every year, I'm beating the heat at "Back to School" sales, clutching printed lists of school supplies, pushing a cart through crowded aisles of crayons and calculators, deciphering children's wants vs. needs for a new backpack or lunch box, and dropping my jaw at the final cost in the checkout line.

The summer sun is still high in the sky, but the air-conditioned halls of school are calling: a new grade, a new start. Ninth-grader Catherine and seventh-grader Daniel have fewer boxes of markers and glue sticks to purchase – replaced by school technology fees for netbooks – but the ritual remains. And while they are "too old" for the Backpack Blessing at church, it continues to be one of my favorite liturgical moments.

Dear God, as we get ready to start another year in school, we ask your blessing on these backpacks and especially on these children who will wear them. As they do the very important work of being students, bless them with: eagerness to learn, that their world may grow large; respect for teachers and students, that they may form healthy relationships; love for nature, that they may become caretakers of your creation; happiness when learning is easy and stick-to-it-iveness when it is hard; faith in Jesus as their best teacher and closest friend... (Sundays and Seasons: Year A 2011)

This is what we as church should be doing: praying that our young people go into their world of school, seeking wis-

dom and knowledge, practicing care and kindness and then coming back to church to reflect on where God is alive and active in their work and their play. Church is one of the central places for prayer.

Our public schools are not.

In the state where I live, there is something called "The Silent Prayer and Reflection Act" which states the following: "In each public school classroom the teacher shall observe a brief period of silence with the participation of all the pupils therein assembled at the opening of every school day. This period shall not be conducted as a religious exercise but shall be an opportunity for silent prayer or for silent reflection on the anticipated activities of the day." (State of Illinois Public Act 095-0680)

Never mind the fact that the courts and Congress have affirmed students' rights to voluntarily pray or express their religious views throughout the course of any day. No matter that students have the right to form religious clubs like any other non-curricular club and even the right to publicize their events via school-supported media. (To learn more, download *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* from <http://bit.ly/1E20mZS>)

Yet our elected officials found it necessary to legislate and mandate a daily moment of prayer. Why? Can prayer be legislated? And since when is a public invitation for silent prayer *not* a religious exercise? I ask these questions as an ordained minister and a person of faith who is committed to religious and non-religious diversity in our schools and to

creating public spaces that accommodate and protect this diversity. Mandated moments of silent prayer do not. Instead, they are born of decades-long efforts by some Christians to bring (Christian) prayer back to our schools. I believe this does a disservice to the spirit of voluntary association and religious liberty that our country, at its best, has fostered and guaranteed.

But this doesn't mean that there isn't a place for religion in the classroom. There is. *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* is a resource for teachers, parents and communities of faith alike. Endorsed by numerous public school and religious associations (from the National PTA to the National Association of Evangelicals), this guide not only clarifies the legal and constitutional contexts for the place of religion in school, it also equips (and encourages) teachers to engage religion in the classroom.

To summarize, engaging religion in the classroom must be: academic, not devotional; about awareness, not acceptance; for study, not practice; about exposure, not imposition; educational, not promotional; informing, not conforming.

In fact, teaching about religion is absolutely essential across the curriculum, from music to social studies to literature. As a parent, I want religion to be engaged as summarized above, and naturally

woven into my children's studies, as any other component of human identity and history. As a pastor, I want our congregations' children to bring their learning about their world grown large, including its religious diversity, into church and lives of faith so that together we might ponder the mystery and wonder of God's presence in cultures and traditions far beyond our own — all the while affirming God's grace through Jesus Christ alive in theirs. As Psalm 27:1 proclaims: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

As our children and grandchildren, young church members and neighbors load up their backpacks and head back to school this fall, let's pray wholeheartedly for them, offering blessings and encouragement. Let us not be afraid to discuss important questions about the place of prayer and religion in our public schools. And let us pray for our own "stick-to-it-iveness" as we engage these questions in our own communities of faith. 🌸

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SLOW DOWN

In a scene from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice and the Red Queen run lickety-split through a chessboard gardenscape, hand in hand, the Queen exhorting, "Faster! Faster!" Breathless, Alice replies, "Well in our country ... you'd generally get to somewhere else – if you ran very fast for a long time, as we've been doing."

"A slow sort of country!" said the Queen. "Now here you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."

Poor Alice. I know how she feels. No doubt you do too. For the pace of our lives is not so different from hers. Even when you work like the trooper you are, there's too much left on your to-do list: a bill to pay, an aunt's birthday to remember, a cake to bake for your book club, a promised prayer you forgot to say. Nor does our plugged-in lifestyle help. I keep my cellphone by my bed at night since it has a built-in light to guide me down the hall should I need it. But along with the

light every night come a handful of text messages I don't need – "Breaking News" at 3 a.m. from a world that doesn't sleep. We could paraphrase St. Paul from Romans 7:24: "Wretched one that I am, who will rescue me from this"

In verse 25 St. Paul gives his own answer, "Thanks be to God" Blessedly our answer also comes from God. Hardly has the Hebrew Scripture begun before we hear the final refrain of the Creation story: "And on the seventh day God finished the work ... and ... rested on the seventh day So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work ... done in creation" (Genesis 2:2). What a wonderful truth: God caps God's own work with rest.

What's more, God folds a day of rest, the Sabbath, into the Ten Commandments: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy [set apart]. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work -



SABBATH AHEAD

by Nancy J. Steinhilber

you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock or the alien resident in your towns" (Exodus 20:8–10). If our creative God weaves rest into the fabric of God's life, who are we not to? It all sounds sooooo good. If as some theologians suggest, in our care of the earth we are "co-creators" with God, shouldn't we also be "co-resters" with God?

Yet our daily lives keep staring us in the face – and staring us down. Like Alice, we run in place, huffing and puffing. It is precisely at such moments that we should stop, take a deep breath and look about us. When we do, we'll begin to notice all kinds of "holy helps" God's Spirit builds into our everyday environment to slow us down and help us "think sabbath." Let's look at a few.

Holy helps

OUR OWN BREATH: What better gift to focus on than the very breath of God given us at birth? The breath

that now sustains us daily. So stop right now. Sit in a straight-backed yet comfortable chair, feet on the floor, eyes closed if you wish. Breathe in s-l-o-w-l-y and d-e-e-p-l-y. As you inhale let your abdomen (rather than your chest) push out. Then when you exhale let your abdomen deflate to its normal position. This takes some getting used to. Most of us are "shallow breathers." But as you practice this deep breathing you'll begin to feel the welcome slowness of your breath. Feels good, doesn't it? No wonder we're told to take "deep, cleansing breaths" when we're under stress.

My husband and I have come to know this deep, slow breathing since we took up a gentle type of Tai Chi several years ago. Designed to help with balance, arthritis and osteoporosis, it was taught to us first through a class at our church in Florida. Now we practice it in our living room with DVDs by Paul Lam, a genial Chinese medical doctor and Tai Chi expert, whom we've come to think of almost as family (www.



taichiproductions.com). This deep breath is what the Chinese call “Qi Gong” breathing. It not only helps calm you for Tai Chi’s slow movements, but as you get the rhythm of it, it’ll help you slow down in other parts of your day.

A PLACE APART: You’ve probably heard it said, “Come apart before you ‘come apart.’” You get its meaning. Find a quiet place for yourself and make it yours. It should be a place where you can hear God say – to you alone – “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). The Old Testament prophet Elijah learned that God doesn’t come in whirlwind or quake or fire, but rather in “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12). Ask, “Where in my home can I dedicate my place apart?” Almost any place can work as long as you know that when you go there, it’s time to care for your soul. As the book of James promises, when you come near to God, God will come near to you (4:8).

The place apart in our home is actually a church pew – a little, red-cushioned, 5-foot pew we found in a newspaper ad. It took some ingenuity on my husband’s part to squeeze it into our hatchback to get it home. Now it resides in the kitchen, looking out our eastern exposure window. There, each morning I can find my husband, who loves sunrises, sitting in his dark-but-soon-to-be-light place apart – quiet, meditative, accompanied only by an equally quiet cat.

BEAUTY IN OUR MIDST: “Beauty will save the world.” That’s writer Fyodor Dostoevsky speaking, steeped as he was in the Russian art of iconography. Sister Carol Frances Jegen, a frequent writer in early issues of *Gather* (*Lutheran Woman Today* by its previous name) used Dostoevsky’s insight as she named beauty one of the four hallmarks of Christian spirituality. She believed beauty is something we can all bring to this world, and that as we do, we are in a very real sense helping to

re-create the beauty of that first creation. She also sees beauty as an antidote to violence. Oh, how our violent world today needs all the beauty we can create! What beauty do you bring to your world? A quilt you're working on? A specially set table for dinner? A single rose you're taking to someone in a nursing home? A letter to your congressperson about care of the earth? What beauty would you like to add to God's world? Do it.

Psychotherapist and writer Thomas Moore in his book *Care of the Soul* echoes this same belief: "If we are going to care for the soul, and if we know that the soul is nurtured by beauty, then we will have to understand beauty more deeply and give it a more prominent place in life."

STOPPING TIME: Are you ever so caught up in a book that you lose track of time? Hours pass like minutes... and everything becomes present tense. If so, bless you, you have come close to "stopping time." I believe the curtain separating here from eternity is never more sheer than when we can stop time. In what do you get so deeply involved that time "stands still"? Working in your garden? Cross-stitching a Christmas stocking? Taking your therapy dog to a children's hospital? Whatever it is, relish the experience and know God is smiling at your creativity. It is the gift-giving Holy Spirit in action, and a kind of sabbath of its own.

Outside your kitchen door: When you slow down, you may at times feel the palpable presence of God. No one knows this better than Barbara Mahany, a one-time oncology nurse-turned-writer-and-newspaper-columnist.

In her book *Slowing Time: Seeing the Sacred Outside Your Kitchen Door*, she celebrates the seasons of the year (and winter twice!) in essays on the holy and sacred she finds outside her kitchen door. Each section opens with entries called "Blessings" that set the stage for her essays. One autumn blessing so caught me that I read it aloud to myself so the images would linger: "There

is faith galore in tucking in a bulb, concentrated life. Setting it just so, roots poking down, shoot facing skyward, where vernal sun will tickle it awake, coax from frozen earth, startle us with tender slips of green. Resurrection, sealed beneath the earth."

Her entry "Peekaboo with Cheddar Moon: On Chasing Wonder" is alone worth the price of the book. Another, "The Pigeon Man of Lincoln Square: On Saints Among Us," reveals that the sacred and holy also mean connecting with others, especially others in need. Another plus: She offers a recipe fitting for each season, shared from family or friends.

Slowing Time is also remarkable for how lovingly the author weaves in examples from her Catholic Christian faith and her husband's Jewish faith. Especially to be savored is how their family, under the canopy of night stars, marks Sukkot, the seven-day Festival of Booths outlined in Leviticus 23.

All these holy helps can lead us to remember and mark as holy the Sabbath where we gather for worship with our sisters and brothers, the communion of saints. In proclamation and music and corporate prayer, we get to praise our creating, redeeming and sanctifying God. We get to receive a "foretaste of the feast to come." It's a Sabbath to remember and repeat often.

In between such times, however, may we embrace the sabbaths we discover in the everyday. As for me, when I finish this article, I'm heading for my kitchen pew. There I will look outside my window, be still and listen for God.

And when that is over, perhaps my imagination will allow me to channel Alice in her Wonderland. If so, I'll take her hand, squeeze it gently and whisper: "Slower, Alice, slower." 🌸

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FINDING ROOM *for* SABBATH

"Stick a fork in me. I'm done."

*Have you ever heard that expression before? Maybe you've used it yourself.
It means you're tired of, or fed up with, your current situation.*

*That was me earlier this year. **I was done.***



by Brenda Meier Kimaro

You see, I'm an introvert married to an extrovert. And we live in my husband's native Tanzania, the most extroverted culture of which I've ever been a part. My husband, Kakasii, seems to know at least every third person we encounter on the street here in Arusha, one of the largest cities in Tanzania. And he has a huge family, with 28 siblings and half-siblings (yes, you read that right). That puts a lot of pressure on this introvert to engage with people all the time. And, while often enjoyable, it's exhausting.

Professionally, I'm a writer and photographer, and I also help Kakasii with his safari business. Together, we are volunteer directors for a small school serving the children of a poor community outside of town.

I'm also a mother of five, including four-year-old twins. Enough said.

Coming apart at the seams

As I neared my 45th birthday in March, I could feel myself coming apart at the seams with the demands and busyness of life in Tanzania as a wife, mother, writer and volunteer. I was distracted, short on patience, physically exhausted and mentally spent. It was time to stick a fork in me because I was most certainly done.

That extroverted husband of mine — well, he's also incredibly thoughtful. As he saw me slipping deeper and deeper into a spiritual, mental and physical malaise, he arranged for me to take a personal retreat as a

birthday gift — four days to myself at a retreat center run by Lutheran deaconesses on Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Insert sigh of relief here.

It was time to rest. To slow down and be quiet. To hear what God had to say to me.

Despite my desperation for the quiet and slower pace, I couldn't resist the urge to take my laptop and use the much-anticipated, kid-free time to catch up on some writing jobs. But a well-timed power outage soon drained the laptop battery and I was left with nothing but time.

The gift of time

So I surrendered to the situation and decided to enjoy the peacefulness of my surroundings. I situated myself on the veranda of the retreat center's main house and enjoyed the time to read and reflect. Each morning and afternoon the deaconesses would bring me a cup of tea. I was careful to savor that tea as I sat quietly, watching for sunbirds that might come to the nearby flowers for a little sip of nectar.

My book of choice was *Undone* by Michele Cushatt. The subtitle to her book really piqued my interest: *A story of making peace with an unexpected life*. Having made my way from small-town Nebraska to city life in Tanzania with a safari-guide husband and five children was certainly unexpected — and often challenging.

Cushatt's story of her battle with

oral cancer, seeking harmony for her blended family and building her career as a writer and speaker quickly drew me in, but I had no idea that it would bring an important message God had for me in the quiet of that weekend.

“Like an overdrawn bank account, I’d spent more than I’d brought in for far too long. I was physically and emotionally bankrupt,” Cushatt writes. “I just didn’t know how to keep up with it. And the not-keeping-up made me feel like I was failing. And the feeling-like-a-failure drained energy and emotion I didn’t have to spare.”

“Yes, exactly,” I thought. “That’s just how I feel.”

Like Kakasii, Cushatt’s husband also recognized his wife’s need for renewal. Instead of a retreat center on a mountain, he arranged for a week on a beach in the Caribbean. During that trip, a harrowing experience while scuba diving caused Cushatt to reflect on her faith.

“Where is my faith?” she wrote. “In myself, more often than not.” She realized that she had been trying to fight her own battles, assuming it was all her own responsibility to meet life’s demands.

With two short sentences, something clicked inside of me. Where was my faith? In myself, just like Cushatt had realized. I also had put my faith in myself, rather than God. In that quiet time, those hours without electricity or Internet or the busyness of life and work to distract me, it became clear that I had separated myself from God by putting myself in charge.

That revelation hit me like a ton of bricks. I cried, falling into a pathetic heap on the floor (back in the privacy of my room, not there on the veranda for anyone to see, thank goodness). I was overwhelmed; regretful of my arrogance to think that I could go my own way rather than relying on God. I begged God’s forgiveness.

Rested and refreshed, but scared to death

Those four days on Mt. Kilimanjaro put me in my place spiritually. They snapped me back to my senses.

I was clear again on who was in charge and on whom I needed to lean.

I left the retreat center feeling physically rested, spiritually renewed and scared to death. Would I forget this important lesson as soon as I went back to Arusha and every third person on the street was greeting us and expecting me to chat in Swahili? Or when we walked into our house and two preschoolers were leaping at me, ready to make up for four missed days of Mommy’s attention? What urgency would come with the ringing of my phone or the opening of my email that would pull me back into the hectic rush?

Would I fall back into my old pattern of “going my own way” as soon as the demands and distractions of my life rose up again?

I felt like turning and running right back up that mountain for another four days – or maybe 40 – or quiet, peace and calm. But hiding out on a mountain wasn’t the solution. I needed to find a new rhythm in my life to keep me anchored in my faith.

I needed sabbath.

In her book *Unglued*, author Lysa TerKeurst writes of the importance of keeping sabbath. “Where there is a lack of Sabbath rest,” she writes, “there is an abundance of stress.”

Referring to what she calls “emotional white space,” TerKeurst reminds us that the Bible makes it very clear that we are to make time for rest. And not just physical rest, but spiritual and emotional rest from “going our own way.” Count me as convicted on this one.

Just like Liv Larson Andrews, who wrote our Bible study, I too have a friend who observes a sabbath, fiercely guarding that time each week for her and her family to rest in God. And she goes the whole nine yards, too, even cooking meals ahead so she doesn’t spend her sabbath day in the kitchen.

She says it’s been life-changing. I tend to believe her, too, because I can’t imagine anyone who needs more to intentionally and regularly fall into God’s



Brenda Meier Kimaro is making progress toward spending sabbath time at her home in Tanzania (above).

comfort and peacefulness than my friend. She and her husband run a baby home here in Arusha, taking in and caring for orphaned and abandoned babies of which, sadly, there are many in Tanzania. While their work comes with many joys of reunifying families and finding loving adoptive homes, they also witness firsthand the pain, loss and abandonment that these babies endure early in their lives.

Without that time of rest in the Lord, I wonder if she and her husband would have the strength to face their work day after day.

I will give you rest'

When I returned to my home after my mountaintop (well, technically I was only on the side of the mountain) revelation, I dug up an old index card upon which I had once written:

"Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying your heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. The yoke I give you is easy; and the load I will put on you is light."

That's Matthew 11:28-30. I had scribbled out those words more than 20 years ago, long before I became a wife and mother. I'm not sure I even knew where Tanzania was then.

When I wrote out those verses, I was a young woman, just getting my professional start, sitting at my

office desk completely burnt out, lacking any clarity whatsoever and wishing I could just run away from it all. "Stick a fork in me, I'm done" applied as much then as it had before my retreat.

If I'm being honest, I've had at least a handful more of times when I have felt completely done. That's probably why I've held on to that dog-eared, stained index card all this time.

Those verses of Scripture are now my sabbath mantra. I'm making imperfect progress toward keeping a full sabbath day each week, but at least I am spending some sabbath time most days – free from the phone, social media and TV – soaking in the quiet and the peace that comes from being present in the Lord (as much quiet and peace as you can get with two four-year-olds running around, anyway).

I love that with each Scripture reading in the Bible study, we are asked to take a few deep breaths. Even that simple pause gives a taste of what sabbath has to offer. In fact, let's go back a few paragraphs now, take three deep, cleansing breaths and read again Matthew 11:28-30. And then, as we're instructed, go to God and find comfort in the rest God provides.

Then stick that fork back in the kitchen drawer. You won't need it anymore. 🌿

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SABBATH KEEPING

Opening hymn

Many and Great, O God, Are Your Works, *ELW* 837

Theme verse

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

Exodus 20:8

Overview

O snail

Climb Mount Fuji

But slowly, slowly!

—Japanese poet Issa (1763–1828)

The Scripture teaches a rhythm and pace for life. The Bible contains no poem like this haiku instructing us to be like snails and “take it slow.” But there is an overarching theme in the Bible that time is in God’s hands. A life redeemed by God moves at the speed of redemption: day by day, moment by moment. From the gift of sabbath to manna in the desert, through the psalms, then in the parables of Jesus, we hear God telling us that all time is holy and that human beings are meant to live in sacred sync with God’s rhythms.

In our present day of instant-everything, God’s rhythms get drowned out. As we are pulled and pressured by increasing demands on our time, living in any kind of rhythm can seem like an elusive dream. Wages do not stretch to cover the cost of food so we add a second job. We search for work and cannot find any, so our days drag on in despair. Technology meant to help us save time invades our every moment, while offering greater connection with loved ones as well as with our work email account. Even life in the church, set aside to be restorative and healing, can become burdensome. We just don’t have enough time.

Slow is the new fast

When McDonald’s planned to open a restaurant on the Spanish Steps in Rome, Italian townspeople took to the streets holding bowls of penne pasta and signs that read, “We don’t want fast food! We want slow food!” The year was 1986. From that protest, a worldwide movement blossomed. Slow Food, a global effort to eat mindfully and locally, urges people to feed themselves and one another in concert with rhythms of the planet.

A harried father hears of a new time-saving fa

called the One Minute Bedtime Story. At first he is titillated, eager to hear how he can trim the cumbersome bedtime ritual with his young child and save time so that he can be more productive. Moments later, he comes to his senses, thinking, "Have I gone insane? I am Scrooge with a stopwatch, obsessed with saving every last scrap of time, a minute here, a few seconds there."

That busy dad was Carl Honore, and that testimony begins his helpful book, *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (HarperOne, 2004). From food and medicine to work, exercise and sex, Honore takes a good look at how we can embrace the movement to take it "slow." In the realm of faith, *Slow Church* (IVP Books, 2014), C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison oppose what they call the predominance of McChurch. McChurch is a nickname for the explosion of big-box churches offering up the same spiritual goods regardless of place or setting. These two books, along with *Practicing Our Faith* by Dorothy Bass (Jossey-Bass, 2009), have inspired this Bible study. I'm wondering: What can we find in the Scripture and in our faith tradition to help us rediscover the rhythms of God?

TAKE A MOMENT TO DISCUSS TOGETHER

In what areas of life do you feel most rushed or most vulnerable to the pressure to speed up? What parts of your life help you slow down and dwell in the moment?

Instead of fast food, fast family and fast faith, we need the Bible's rich teachings about the divine gifts of rest, freedom and wholeness. Bass' *Practicing Our Faith* illustrates several Christian practices that address our need to open these gifts. In her essay, "Keeping Sabbath," she rightly points out that "we need Sabbath, even though we doubt we have time for it."

In this session we will explore two instances in which Yahweh teaches the people to take it slow: to keep the Sabbath. The Sabbath, one day a week set aside for rest and play, is probably the single most important example of godly rhythms in the Bible. In one instance, Sabbath-keeping is given to humans to live in concert with the pattern of creation: six days of work, one day of rest. In the other, the Sabbath is a practice given to the people in order that they might remember that they are free; God brought them out of slavery.

PART 1

A rhythm for life given in creation

The first scene in the first story in our holy book confronts our temptation to keep speeding up life. God creates life at a given pace. God speaks and the whole world comes into being (Genesis 1:1-2). It does not happen in a single instant – poof! Rather, creation takes six whole days to form. Each day is a deliberate effort with specific results, a particular taming of some kind of chaos. Each day ends with a poetic description of sunset and sunrise, "there was evening, and there was morning." This creation story is patterned on God's gift of time.

The last day is no exception: it is a day of rest, and the specific result is the creation of the Sabbath. Perhaps the chaos tamed on the seventh day of creation, and every Sabbath since then, is our need for speed.

Take three deep, cleansing breaths. (Mother Teresa of Calcutta was once asked, "What do you say to God when you pray?" She replied, "I just listen." "And what does God say?" She answered, "God just listens.")

READ EXODUS 20:8-11 ALOUD. Share a word or phrase in the text that catches your attention.

List all the kinds of people (and non-people) that experience the Sabbath. Can you imagine still other parts of creation enjoying sabbath rest? Trees, streams, oceans, clouds, mountains and deserts?

DISCUSS

What words are used to describe what we do/do not do on the Sabbath? What might it mean for you to have a special “holy” day of your own? Are there days where holiness was matched with rest? Can you embrace elements of those best, restful and holy days without judging yourself for failing to “keep Sabbath”?

Take another look at the list of everyone who gets to experience Sabbath. Pretty much the whole human community is listed, plus animals who help humans work. Everything stops. Everybody takes a break. Bosses and hourly workers, skilled laborers and day laborers, even strangers in the land get to rest. In Genesis, all things experience harmony in God. Since every creature has been made by God, every creature enjoys Sabbath rest. What a counter-cultural idea!

What gets in the way of embracing this radical Sabbath when everyone rests? Why, in your mind, do you think we resist it? Where is God leading you to be more patient or slow in life?

Verse 8 instructs, “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.” (Hebrew: *zakhar* – to recall, to be mindful of, to celebrate) This kind of remembering is deeper than keeping track of names and dates, though it involves those kinds of details. For example, a mother uses a special plate for serving cake on her children’s birthdays. It marks the day and makes it special. It just isn’t a birthday without the birthday plate. When the children go to college, the mother ships their plates in the mail a week before the birthday comes. Now the birthday celebration retains the connection to home and family.

Describe an event or celebration in your life that happens in order to remember something. With whom

do you share this time? What happens if the event is forgotten? What parts of our Sunday worship might be seen as this kind of family remembrance and ritual?

READ EXODUS 20:8–11 ALOUD AGAIN. Take a deep breath. Take a moment to imagine what real rest means to you. Describe it to the group.

Do you find it difficult to rest or relax? Why? What guides the pattern of your day or week? In what ways might we help our neighbors and friends find rest? Are there times when taking good rest has made you more effective in your work or family life?

Sunday Sabbaths

In worship, there comes a time when the president repeats the words of Jesus around the table, saying, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Liturgical scholar Gail Ramshaw teaches that we would be more accurate in saying, “do this to commemorate me.” It’s not just that we bring Jesus to mind in the ritual; we seek to follow him, to become his body. The way the word “remember” comes up in our table blessing is much like the way it is used in Exodus 20. The remembering goes deeper than thought; it is meant to shape our whole lives.

We may bring various memories about Sunday patterns from our childhood. In my family, it was the one day a week that we ate in a restaurant. When we were little, it was Wendy’s, and the taste of a Frosty that I shared with my younger brother still evokes memories of being with my family after worship. For others, it was a day of obligation. No play. Highly starched clothes.

During my pastoral internship in rural Virginia I often wanted to relax after my Sunday morning responsibilities and enjoy some wine with dinner. But if I waited until Sunday to get it, I couldn’t. Thanks to blue laws, legislation designed to restrict or ban many Sunday activities for religious reasons, the state of Virginia prohibited the purchase of alcohol on Sunday.

had more than one red-faced moment in the checkout line of the grocery store!

And yet for others of us, Sunday may have been just another day.

PART 2

A rhythm of life given in freedom

If you have ever visited the G concourse of the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport, you know it's different. Instead of the typical banks of padded chairs for passengers to sit in while waiting, there are sleek tables and slender chairs. Every seat is equipped with an iPad. Every. Single. Seat. Coming around the corner into the concourse, your eyes are greeted by a sea of flickering screens. There is no place to stand or sit that's free from the glare of these flashing personal devices. To "wait" in that area is to experience totally inescapable technological stimulation.

Technology bears much criticism for its invasive nature and totalizing effect on us. And while it is reasonable to question and criticize new technologies, the experience of being overwhelmed by them is nothing new. In 200 B.C., the playwright Plautus laments the presence of sundials all over his town, asking, "Who in this place set up a sundial to cut and hack my days too wretchedly into small pieces?" When my family visited the G concourse of MSP, I went to the trouble to find the "off" switch on our three iPads. Three dark screens. It felt like a tiny rebellion. And it felt so good. We found not just rest for the eyes, but freedom from stimulus.

We have examined how the book of Exodus introduces the gift of the Sabbath day by describing God's work in creation. When the Sabbath day is mentioned in Deuteronomy, however, it is given a different explanation. Recalling the events of Exodus chapters 14 and 15, Deuteronomy instructs the people of Israel to

What are your memories about Sunday from childhood? What is your Sunday rhythm now? How do you feel connected to the past or the future in worship? How might we make Sunday set aside not through restrictions but through special actions, in what we wear, cook, share, or eat?

keep the Sabbath because God brought them out of slavery. As Dorothy Bass explains, "Slaves cannot take a day off. Free people can. Sabbath rest is a recurring testimony against the drudgery of slavery." It is also a testimony about the goodness of God, and God's desire for all creatures to live in freedom.

READ DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15 ALOUD. Take three deep, cleansing breaths. Share a word or phrase that caught your attention.

DISCUSS

What are the people asked to "remember" in this passage? Notice that slaves also receive Sabbath rest. What do you think about this? Maybe add: What kinds of people in our country work most on Sunday?

Back in Egypt, "They set up taskmasters over (the Israelites) to oppress them with forced labor ... and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor." (Exodus 1:11) Few of us have experienced true enslavement, being robbed of our freedom, worth, and dignity. But when work begins taking over other aspects of life, making demands on our time beyond the workday, our freedom, our self-worth, and sometimes our dignity can be at risk.

A comedy of the mid-1990s describes what happens to average office workers when their sense of dignity disappears into the drudgery of their job. In

this clip from *Office Space*, an obnoxious boss steals the precious free time of his employees:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjJCdCXFsIY>

In another scene, a group of office friends finally snap and take out their rage on a malfunctioning printer using baseball bats.

We laugh at this partly because the feeling is familiar. Tiny misfires like printing errors send us over the deep end because our inner dignity feels compromised. When our time is equated with some other good or value, it becomes oppressive. "Time is money," Ben Franklin famously observed, and most of American culture nods in agreement. We caution each other about wasting time. We worry when a day ends and we feel we've not been "productive enough." Another gift of Sabbath-keeping is that the six days of work have meaning and value. We don't have to continually measure ourselves to higher and higher standards. "Six days" of work is enough.

What is your work rhythm? If you do not work outside the home, what kind of rhythms do you keep within the home? Do you fret about being productive? Have you ever experienced work as slavery? Have you experienced work as joyful? What made the difference?

Carl Honore describes a significant change in work patterns in America that occurred at the end of the 19th century. Frederick Taylor was a consultant employed by Bethlehem Steel Works in Pennsylvania. Sometimes credited with inventing the assembly line, Taylor ominously stated, "In the past, the man has been first. In the future, the System must be first." (Honore, p. 28) The "system" was a process to gain efficiency in the steel plant, training workers to go four times as fast in their daily tasks. Many employees quit, complaining of stress and fatigue. And though Taylor himself was fired due to complaints in 1901, his influence remained.

"Taylorism" is the name given to systems that value uniformity over initiative in workers, creating a robot-like role for human workers to fill. This spelled disaster for workers' dignity and freedom. While unions have won some of that dignity back, industrial workers today still experience inconsistent hours and very high standards of productivity. Indeed, actual robots are being used more and more to replace humans altogether.

Can you think of a time when your work environment became unjust? How did you respond?

In *The Sabbath* (New York: Burning Bush Press, 1970) Rabbi Samuel H. Dresner writes, "Indeed, one can never truly know the inward feeling of the Sabbath without the outward form. The Sabbath is not a theory to be contemplated, a concept to be debated, or an idea to be toyed with. It is a day, a day filled with hours and minutes and seconds, all of which are hallowed by the wonderful pattern of living that the nobility of the human spirit has fashioned over the course of the centuries."

But how? How do we break from unjust or oppressive work patterns? Most of the time, it requires creativity, community, and strength.

A friend in college felt burdened by mounting homework and extracurricular activities. Between choir practice, tutoring, theatre and classes, there seemed to be no spare time. He would find himself wanting a break, and unwittingly spending hours making meals, talking to friends, or taking walks. But he only felt more stressed and pressured. He decided to make a change. He declared the time between sunrise on Saturday through sunset on Sunday to be sabbath time. No homework, and if possible, no rehearsals. It was time for walks, worship, meals, and friends. Somehow, declaring the time open meant he felt better about not "getting things done" then. The stress and pressure waned, and he got his work done as well.

For my friend, the deliberate act of declaring certain

time sabbath time was key. In college, every moment of life can be gobbled up by obligations or activities. Too often it is the same way outside of college, too. Once he made the deliberate effort, others of us liked the idea. A small cohort of students began observing a more real sabbath. It was one of the single most life-giving decisions we made. We needed each other for the strength to stick to our decision. Of course the more of us who made this choice, the easier it became to keep the sabbath rhythm.

Look at the two Sabbath lessons, Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15, side by side. Look at them within the larger context of both readings as well. In each case, the teaching is given as a part of the law, the Ten Commandments. Just by glancing across the text, you can see that in both cases they form the longest description of any of the Ten Commandments. Most other commands are a single line. The Sabbath teaching is a paragraph. Does it cast a different light upon the Ten Commandments as a whole if their center, their beating heart, is sabbath?

In *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Brazos, 2006), Norman Wirzba writes, "When we become a Sabbath people, we give one of the most compelling witnesses to the world that we worship a God who desires our collective joy and good. We give concrete expression to an authentic faith that is working to deflate the anxious and destructive pride that supposes we have to 'do it all' by ourselves and

through our own effort." My college friend gave witness to our God who sets us free. His witness spread and helped a handful of others return to balance, dignity and freedom.

READ DEUTERONOMY 5:12–15 ALOUD AGAIN.

What gets in the way of rest and balance? How could you change the rhythms of your days or weeks to include sabbath time? When do you experience freedom?

Closing prayer — a poem

Whatever is foreseen in joy
Must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark
By our ten thousand days of work.
Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.
When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good.
—Wendell Berry, "X" by Wendell Berry,

from *A Timbered Choir* (Counterpoint, 1998). 🌿

The Rev. Liv Larson Andrews is the pastor of Salem Lutheran in Spokane, Wash. She lives with her husband and two children, and dreams of hosting a lectionary-based cooking show.

For further study, read:

Ched Meyers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Church of the Savior, 2006).

Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath* (Brazos, 2006)

Carl Honore, *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (HarperOne, 2004)

Chris Smith and John Pattison, *Slow Church* (IVP Books, 2014).

Or check out online:

www.slowfood.com

www.cittaslow.org

www.slowerandslower.org

www.practicingourfaith.org/keeping-sabbath

A LEADER'S GUIDE

Time & breath

One goal is for the women gathered to gain a sense of biblical time and the gifts of God's grace that unfold over time. To this end, leaders should feel comfortable taking as much *time* as is needed. Feel free to slow the pace at any time by inviting participants to pause or breathe.

Breath prayer is an ancient and potent practice for slowing ourselves down. At several points in this session, the questions begin with a suggestion: "Take three cleansing breaths." We might wonder what distinguishes a normal breath from a cleansing one. I often say it is breathing that happens with attention to the breath itself. You may invite the group to visualize the breath coming into their lungs, bringing necessary oxygen to their cells, then carrying out the carbon dioxide. Attentive breathing can bring us into the room, ground us in the task at hand and awaken our minds for study.

Rhythms and relationships

A second goal for this study is that the women gathered will share personal stories and deepen relationships. Some of the questions in the study regard life choices and patterns. Often, it is easy for us to feel less than good enough when a new (or old) ideal is held out, like keeping the Sabbath. As a leader, cultivate sensitivity toward those, including yourself, who may feel judged by discussing the shape of their own lives. Reassure participants that your time together is not for determining who is "better" at keeping the Sabbath. Rather, this study is meant to open us to seeing how all of us dearly need God to bring us into healthy rhythms. The Sabbath is an expression of grace. Try to be mindful of anyone who may begin to feel shut out of discussion around this issue.

Read through the whole session before beginning. You may find it helpful to mark sections you would like to read aloud with the group, and even consider how far you may get through the material in one meeting. Highlight anything you think may be especially interesting or challenging in your context. Print out the texts ahead of time so that readers can prepare: Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15. At the end of session one, the study invites your group to visually examine the two texts side by side. You can do this a number of ways: on paper for each person, on a screen or printed large and posted for the group. Choose in advance which method you'll use.

New practices

A third goal for this study, perhaps, is that the women gathered will cultivate a few new practices for biblical study. One such practice is called *lectio divina*. Latin for "divine reading," *lectio divina* is usually practiced in groups by reading a text aloud three separate times. Each round invites a different reflection or image to come forward. At some points in this session, the participants are invited to name a significant image or phrase that caught their attention. They need not explain why. It is useful to begin rather simply, just speaking aloud the thing that stuck in your mind. Later questions can delve into meaning.

Breathe. Pause. Share. Pray. Be blessed by God who takes time with all of us, teaching, feeding, healing and restoring us. 🌸

The Rev. Liv Larson Andrews is the pastor of Salem Lutheran in Spokane, Wash. She lives with her husband and two children, and dreams of hosting a lectionary-based cooking show.

SABBATH-KEEPING SELF-ASSESSMENT

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

Quiet yourself and make yourself comfortable. Then take a few moments to complete this self-assessment. Begin to reflect on the life you are currently leading as suggested by your answers.

	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I am exhausted at some point in most every day.					
I regularly get as much sleep as I need.					
On a regular basis, I take time each day to pray and reflect on God's presence in my life.					
I don't spend as much time with family as I'd like to.					
I don't spend as much time with friends as I'd like to.					
I think about my work even when I'm not at work.					
My life is out of balance.					
I have too much free time.					
I crave more meaning in my life.					
I'm constantly busy but I still don't seem to accomplish all that much.					
I did some work during my last vacation.					
I often run errands or do housework on Sundays.					
I often go to a mall or do online shopping on a Sunday.					
I've participated in committee meetings at church on a Sunday.					
My children (or grandchildren) regularly have school or community events on Sundays.					

Learning to enjoy the scenery on a detour

WAITING

by Linda Johnson Seyenkulo



*A matter of time
They said and so I waited,
Waited and waited....*

My friend Margie once gave me a card with this saying: "The really happy person is one who can enjoy the scenery on a detour." I have experience with detours and waiting. In fact, I wrote this piece – and the haikus in it – while waiting. Haiku, a Japanese poetry form, is a three-line poem made up of a five-syllable, seven-syllable, and a final five-syllable line. Because I enjoy the discipline of writing, it seemed a good way to help with the wait.

Waiting, waiting, waiting. The last three years have been a time of interminable waiting for me, both personally and professionally. I've been waiting to be with my spouse as our respective calls have had him living in West Africa as the bishop of our partner church, the Lutheran Church in Liberia, and me serving in the U.S. as pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Park Forest, Ill. We've been waiting to be together, waiting to see what will work out call-wise, waiting on a house sale or no house sale and waiting for the end of a terrible Ebola epidemic in West Africa. It has been a time of extreme waiting. It has not been easy.

What's the reward?

In a world of busy activity, waiting doesn't seem to give much of a reward. It is not a very active expenditure of time. Waiting can involve sitting passively, something that can be frustrating to experience and difficult to explain. Waiting can mean doing another distracting activity while you have something else on your mind. The dictionary definition of waiting is: "the action of staying where one is or delaying action until a particular time or until something else happens." Long periods of waiting are unsettling because we do not have a blueprint for how to do a good wait. There are no *Waiting for Dummies* books on the market. The very nature of waiting is uncertain.

So many times in my life I have had to wait:

To hear if I was accepted at college and then graduate school.

For multiple breaks on my left leg to heal so I could

do physical therapy, then waiting for physical therapy to work so I could walk again.

For the crops to mature so I could ride with my friend on the tractor during harvest season.

For a baby to finish developing and be born.

By the computer for election results from overseas.

For a new position.

I've never been good at waiting. A felt-on-burlap wall hanging (I'm dating myself) I fashioned for my college dorm room my freshman year said it well in bright red letters: "God grant me patience—and I want it right now." That was my philosophy then, and it's followed me all my life. No time to sit around. No time to reflect. Just get on with life — full, active life.

Because, you see, waiting has often seemed to me to be a waste of time, a necessary inconvenience in the real stuff of life, in what's really going to happen. I have had places to go, people to see, things to experience. I should confess that sometimes in the midst of one life experience, I was already in my mind planning the next one, imagining what would happen next. I've been told that it seems as though I live three lives in the space in which most people live one life. There's not much time for sitting around and waiting, for taking things of life or faith slow.

Waiting is a part of life for everyone. Yet sometimes there are seasons of waiting that seem to go on and on, and there's little you can do but wait. Those can be difficult times. We can draw on the resources of faith, prayer, reading the Word and meditating to make our waiting into a time of growth and centering.

Reading the Bible reveals that our waiting time is not as much about delaying action as it is about waiting in God's presence, in God's word and in God's will. Instead of a wasted exercise, the Word of God reveals that waiting allows us to be impacted by God. In the gospel stories, Jesus often went off by himself to think and pray, perhaps as he waited for the next ministry

opportunity or the next part of God's call for his life.

Those who wait for God

Will be renewed by waiting

Strengthened to walk and run

(Paraphrase of Isaiah 40:30–33 in haiku form)

In Psalm 130 or Isaiah 40, waiting times are times when God's presence strengthens and renews us. This slow-faith kind of waiting helps us to be totally present in the moment, thinking about what is going on right now, rather than planning ahead for what can happen when this time is done. We can take the time to *just be* and to let God be a part of that being. God's kind of waiting opens us to possibilities, hope and strength — allowing us to walk, run and even soar through life.

That's different from the way I usually think of waiting: that grinding, never-ending, watching-the-clock kind of waiting. It's different from the kind of waiting where we wait for something more important, for "real life" to happen.

Faithfully waiting in God's presence is not always easy in a goal-driven, plan-filled culture where waiting is not valued or seen as productive. But that's how God often works. In the unplanned, in the strangeness of uncertainty, the spirit of God comes to strengthen, to lift up, to fill and to center us. God comes in the midst of waiting, bringing gracious, hopeful, lively, valuable new life.

I'm ready to go

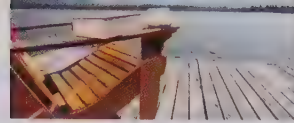
Waiting for life to happen.

Wait—maybe this is life!

The Rev. Linda Johnson Seyenkulo is an ELCA missionary serving as a curriculum developer and trainer at the Louis T. Bowers Lay Leaders and Ministers Training Center in Totota, Liberia. She has spent the last three and a half years being surprised and strengthened by the waiting situations where God has called her.

A photograph of a man and a woman sitting on wooden Adirondack chairs on a wooden dock. They are facing away from the camera, holding hands, and looking out over a calm lake towards a forested shoreline under a cloudy sky. The text "LIFE IS NOT A TIGHTROPE" is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the center of the image.

LIFE IS NOT A TIGHTROPE



Jesus frees us in a multitude of ways, most centrally from our insatiable appetite for self-doubt. His love provides us with the roots of a grounded existence. Jesus unhooks us from our needs to be right, to keep good order and to pretend we are in control. Jesus releases us from the worries, insecurities and fears which so often take up the majority of our heart space.

Through his life, death and resurrection, we are released from all that binds us. We have the freedom to make mistakes, take risks and forgive others and ourselves. God through Christ is the source of this freedom. We are loved permanently and completely with a compassion that frees us forever. The Sabbath is a weekly opportunity to reconnect with this holy source of renewal. It's a whole day to rest in the love, faithfulness and promises of our creator. As we honor the Sabbath, our eternal perspective is restored.

afraid of falling, failing

Far too often, my life feels like day after day of balancing on a tightrope. I fear that one wrong step will cause utter failure. Step too far to the left... I may disappoint everyone. Step too far to the right... I may make a bad decision and ruin all future good possibilities for my life. I'm not sure where this inner critic came from, but it's in there and it's destructive.

Thanks be to God, Jesus offers us an alternative approach to this soul-sucking day-to-day existence. Here it is: what if there's no tightrope at all? What if, instead, we can walk on green grass with Jesus, a faithful friend who accepts us fully and promises never to leave no matter what may come?

Life is not a tightrope. Jesus invites us to spend our

days in his presence living "free and free indeed" (John 8:36). Free from self-preoccupation. Free from loneliness. Free from despair.

I believe at least a portion of the Sabbath's purpose is to spend a whole day every week in the metaphorical green grass of God's presence, saying yes to a restored, grace-filled perspective to life. It's an opportunity to lean all the way into God's love and promises, and set aside everything else.

Chew on this possibility with me: what might it look like for Sabbath-keeping to be about honoring the freedom we have to live in the love of God? How is the Sabbath a restorative celebration – a weekly day set aside to rejoice and be healed from the damage of a restrictive life on a metaphorical tightrope? It is a 24-hour block in which we don't have to prove anything to anyone. The Sabbath gives us a regular chance to be grounded in God's love, and to use our freedom the rest of the week to look beyond ourselves toward God – God who directs us in a way of love extended to others.

A freeing command

For better or for worse, we make much of day-to-day life about ourselves. Our wants. Our needs. Our fears. But on every seventh day, God says, "Today I basically require you to pause long enough to receive my love and look beyond yourself." The official commandment is: "Honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy." It's a day to look beyond the tightrope, be free and say yes to God's love in intentional ways.

In his book *Abba's Child*, Brennan Manning writes, "Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This

is the true self. Every other identity is illusion.” When we are rooted in our identity as beloved by God, we are significantly more able to follow Christ’s commands to love and serve. Less consumed with self-preservation, we are less fearful. We are stable and secure. The Sabbath is our weekly security checkpoint.

My understanding of Sabbath-keeping continues to develop with each season of life. For most of my years, the Sabbath represented a continued lifelong obsession of tightrope walking. It was just one more way to feel good about toeing the line or bad about not measuring up. To worship on Sunday was to stay on the rope. To skip worship was to fall off the tightrope and feel shame and guilt.

I first remember consciously thinking about the word *Sabbath* in seventh grade, while memorizing the meaning of the Third Commandment in Luther’s Small Catechism: “We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it.” Sitting in the front seat of my mom’s Ford Taurus, I crammed the words into my brain before Wednesday night class. I would have to regurgitate them for my instructor. My 12-year-old spirit narrowly synthesized the meaning of that commandment: Go to church!

Sabbath-keeping was a black and white matter at that early age. My legalistic brain didn’t have much room for gray. Sabbath was all about doing the right thing and following the rules.

Then I had a friend in high school whose parents didn’t shop on Sundays. I began to associate Sabbath-keeping with saying no – no to shopping, no to working and no to supporting organizations that were open on Sunday. Go to church on Sundays and say no to everything else. While I didn’t abide by the same Sabbath understanding as my friend’s family, I assumed it was the most devout and therefore correct. My conception of Sabbath-keeping had shifted from being about attending worship to being about attending worship

and saying no. “Perfect,” my legalistic inner critic said. “More ways to measure up and stay on the tightrope!”

As college came to a close, I had quite a pot of Sabbath stereotype stew brewing. I didn’t hold fast to the concoction I’d made up in my mind. But truth be told, proper Sabbath-keeping wasn’t something I had on my mind very often. I did shop on Sundays. I did work on Sundays (when scheduled to do so). And I never made any purchasing distinctions when it came to choosing between businesses that were open on Sunday or closed on Sunday.

Then I headed off to Chicago and the world of theological education. Sabbath was added back into my vernacular. During those years, several of my professors talked about the importance of taking a day of rest every week and setting it apart (whatever day of the week it might be).

Pastors work on Sundays, so it’s tough to consider that a day of rest. As these wise mentors (all of whom had spent time as clergy in congregations) talked about Sabbath-keeping, I realized that the edges around the topic weren’t as rigid as I’d imagined. Honoring God by keeping a day of rest was about more than saying no to work and shopping. To honor the Sabbath and keep it holy was to carve out intentional time for God – specifically, time for resting in God.

These days I understand that Sabbath is about making a conscious effort to receive God’s love and release self-preoccupation. I’ve learned over the years that the only true way to find release from focus on self is to find a firm foundation in God’s love. Each of us longs to know we are loved and valuable. Seeking a love to make us feel secure, we search in all kinds of places: relationships, approval and appearances, to name a few. But only one thing fills the cup we have inside: the love of God. When we believe in God’s love and trust in its legitimacy, we are secure enough to make that space inside to look beyond ourselves. We no longer need to constantly seek love and acceptance.

from everyone else. We can rest; we are free. This is what the Sabbath is about: rest and freedom.

Jesus on the Sabbath

Jesus is an outstanding giver of gifts. In the gospels, he provides a gift to many people by shifting their understanding of the Sabbath. He reminds us that Sabbath is not a burden — it's a present.

During the years of Jesus' earthly ministry, many well-intentioned folks were highly invested in various forms of religious tightrope walking. They thought it was the best pathway to God. Appropriately following the Sabbath was in many ways about saying "no" to a long list of activities.

Then one day, Jesus and his disciples happen to be walking into town on the Sabbath, traveling through a field (see Matthew 23:2). The fellows grab a snack in the form of some grains of wheat in the field. The religious people are mega-concerned, to put it lightly. They say something like, "Jesus, what are your disciples doing? They are not following the Sabbath rules. They've fallen off the tightrope. Get them back on there. How else will we be able to know if we have God's love and approval or not? We have to follow the rules!"

Jesus reminds the tightrope-obsessed, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." His words are a nudge toward the grassy meadow for those who so badly want there to be a way to measure good and bad and right and wrong.

Jesus reminds us that the Sabbath was made for us. It is a weekly, perspective-shifting gift. We'll be more balanced and more able to love God and our neighbors. The tightrope does us no favors. Doubting whether we're truly lovable also does us no favors. An ineffective measuring stick, the tightrope leads to constant condemnation of ourselves and everyone else,

too. But the Sabbath reorients us.

Honor the Sabbath. Not out of guilt or shame, but out of freedom. Open your arms and receive the gift. If you'd like, choose to honor the Sabbath day on Sunday. Or opt for another day. Seek out a way to intentionally rest in God's love every week. On that day, find ways



to say yes to God's faithfulness. Make a gratitude list. Eat your meals slowly and savor the food and drink set before you. Take a restorative nap. Meditate on God's loving promises from the Bible. Worship in community with other people. Take a walk in creation and relish the beauty of living on this mysterious floating orb.

When God first notified people about the Sabbath, God described it as a perpetual covenant, "a sign between me and my children forever" (Exodus 31:17).

Forever and ever, God recognized we'd need intentional time to remember our creator's love, promises, grace, instructions and forgiveness. We are God's beloved children forever. May we have the courage to take time and remember this gift. 🌿

The Rev. Emily Carson is a Lutheran pastor serving as pastor of the congregation for the Toulonville Mission. You can find her at www.missionmission.com.

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Sweet irony! Just as the

Women of the ELCA programming year is gearing up, we're talking about sabbath and slowing down. Precisely because we are moving into our active program year – with monthly Bible studies, service projects, advocacy efforts and fellowship time – it is crucial for us all to become sabbath people.

We now live in a 24/7 world, a world that, at least for us in North America, seems like a society on permanent fast-forward. Many people seemingly delight in what we might call “overwork.” It becomes a badge of honor to talk about 60 to 80 hour work weeks. When a positive spin is put on it, we call those people “driven.”

I've seen what happens to people who “overwork,” who are too driven. They lose joy in their work. They become cranky; they lose perspective; they become gloomy and irritable. Know anyone like that?

Most of us likely think of Sabbath as a particular day. And depending upon our experiences, Sabbath might have negative connotations, especially if we experienced Sabbath as a day with a long list of things we were not allowed to do.

Sabbath means to cease, to rest. We often use the term in two different ways: the actual day when one ceases and rests and also as an attitude or way of living, a posture. Sabbath-keeping is setting aside time for God. Since all days are God's, not just Sunday, sabbath-keeping is a way of managing all of our time spiritually. Since our society says that busyness

is good, that stillness is laziness, that rest is sloth, sabbath-keeping becomes decidedly counter-cultural.

Just because our society is not friendly to sabbath-keeping does not excuse Christians from keeping the Sabbath ... and it surely does not erase our need for Sabbath. Whenever we slow down long enough for God to visit us, we are both practicing Sabbath and inviting the presence of God. Sabbath provides space for clearing the mind. We keep Sabbath to keep proportion, to get to the right size for our lives.

The noted Lutheran author and pastor, Marva Dawn, says: “Sabbath keeping is itself practice for the culmination of God's kingdom, for it is a weekly, day long anticipation of eternity.” Until I read Marva's book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Eerdmans 1989), I never thought of the Sabbath as a weekly, day long anticipation of eternity. That sounds so inviting and exciting – who wouldn't want to live a sabbath life?

Many Christians and Jews alike who keep the Sabbath talk about what joy there is in devoting an entire day to God – so much joy that it spills over into the other days of the week, so much joy that it becomes a way of living, an attitude, not simply a day. Imagine how the ministry of Women of the ELCA might change if we all became sabbath-keepers! ☸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

RACE NOTES

Living a Sabbath life

by Linda Post Bushkofsky





AMEN!

Sabbath challenge

by Catherine Malotky

I'm a "work first, play later" kind of gal, God. My dear ones remind me of this on a regular basis, sometimes grumpily and sometimes gratefully.

Oh, the work I can get done! People are fed, vacations are planned, emails dispatched, split-pea soup is made (with the fat skimmed off the broth!) and gardens are tidied. I can write while the broth cools, and throw a ball for the dog while I'm stretching, and run out to get mail in a jiffy. The plates are spinning in the air, and most days, I don't break too many.

But if I stop for longer than a moment, I'm lost. Who am I if I'm not being productive? Of what value to those I love? What is not getting done that needs to be?

In that moment, I know I've lost track of you, God. My eyes are fixed on the to-do list, and I miss so much wonder. How have my grandson's eyes changed since I saw him last? What has he seen that's changed him in this fast-flying first year? Can I slow down enough to notice?

How is the soil doing hidden beneath the peonies and broccoli? What is its texture and fertility? What do I see inside that tomato? How does the color vary, the little seed cling, the juice drip? What does it taste like? Like the last or different?

These things take attention, God, but they are your generosity flooding my world, if I would slow down enough to taste and see and hear. They give testimony to your wondrous imagination, your deep desire that I be nourished and whole ... and I could miss them all.

Of course, those plates still need attention. People need to be fed. Vacations need to be planned. Emails need to be weeded and responded to. The dog loves that ball, and I love split-pea soup. My grandson is a treasure beyond imagining, but he deserves me, not just my productivity.

Sabbath, God? I'm afraid of it. Am I really loved by you beyond my doing? You created me, and said, "It is good." My faith leads me to confess that you love me first and then we live together and work things out. Is it then my *being* you love? If I stop rushing and doing, will I discover the one you made and love? Will she be there?

This is truly an act of faith you ask of me, to keep the Sabbath. But I should pay attention. One day, as the years take their toll, I will not be able to produce in the concrete ways I do now. What then? Will I have value to you and those I love? In faith, sisters whose lives are longer than mine can teach me. It is true. Love transcends work and tangibility and productivity. Our preciousness is not diminished for those who see us through your eyes, God.

I am humbled by your command to keep Sabbath. Give me courage to see myself as you do. Be gentle with me as I try. Keep my eyes fixed on you so that I might relish the life you offer me.

In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿

The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minn.) as a philanthropic adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher and retreat leader.

Quilts to welcome South African guests

—Submitted by Pauline Bratt, a member of Salem's Hannah Circle and a quilter.



Zwelihle “Zweli” Khumalo and Robin Ramiah dabbled in quilting while in Minnesota visiting congregations of the Southwestern Minnesota Synod’s Great River Conference last spring. From Durban, South Africa, Khumalo and Ramiah served as representatives from Southwestern Minnesota’s companion synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa—South Eastern Diocese. They tied a few knots while at Salem Lutheran Church, St. Cloud, Minn., and learned about the quilts that go to Lutheran World Relief. They each selected a quilt to take home to South Africa so they can teach others about quilting. This spring, Salem quilters delivered about 180 quilts to Lutheran World Relief.

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